SELECTING CONSULTANTS for COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

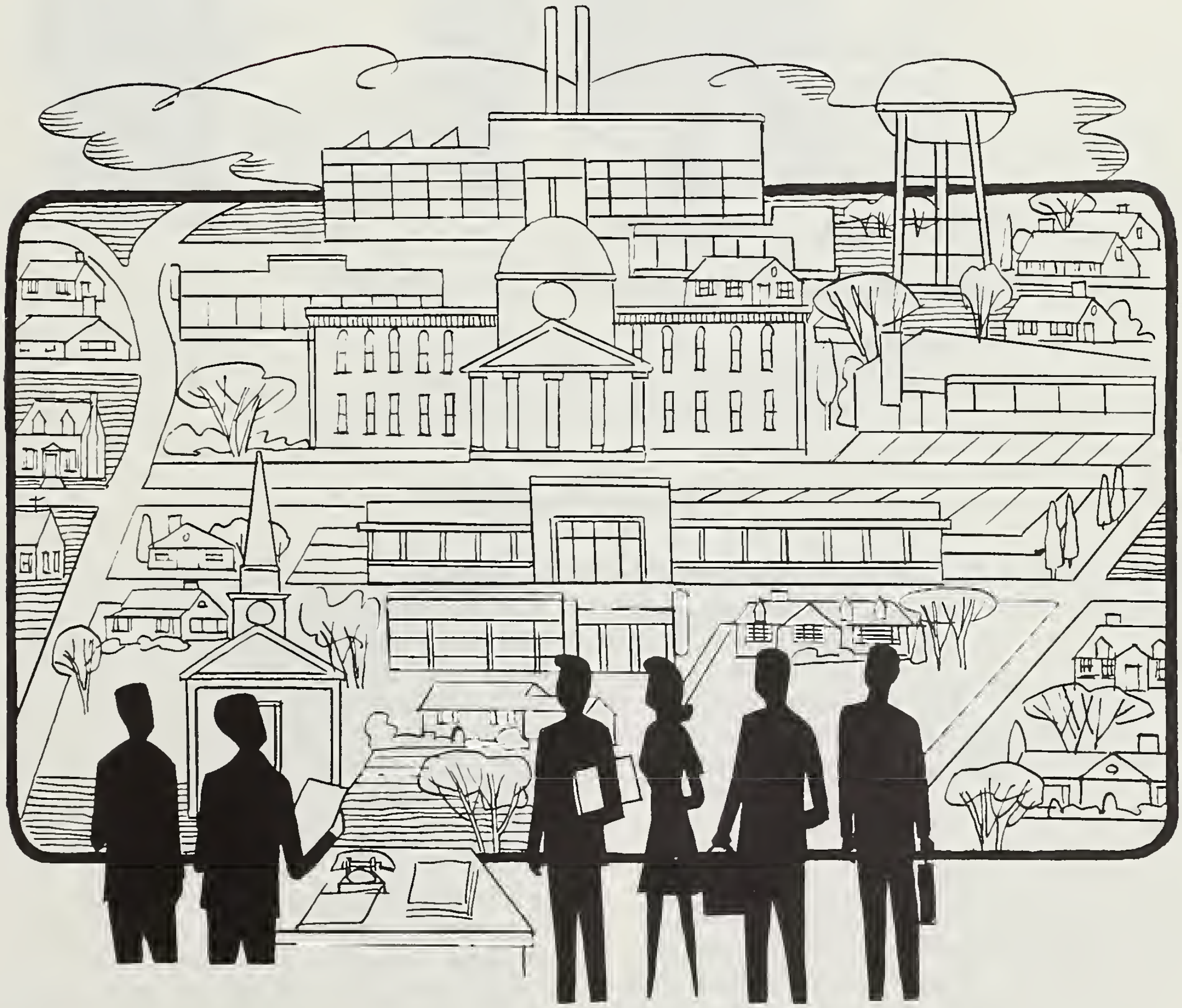

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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SELECTING CONSULTANTS for COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Today, many officials in rural communities, towns, and small cities must select and retain professional consultants to plan and implement their community facilities and service programs. Often local governments do not have such professionals on their own staffs, and must hire consultants.

Too often, communities have been oversold by ambitious consultants and bought a package of expensive services or plans that haven't done the job. This can happen when those purchasing the services have not weighed the consultant's proposal against those of other consultants or other opportunities.

This publication discusses criteria local leaders can use in selecting professional assistants.

- It presents the tasks and responsibilities of local officials seeking consultants.
- It suggests a guide for interviewing applicants.
- It gives criteria for evaluating applicants.
- It offers a guide to local actions during the period the consultant is retained.

In the Appendix are checklists and evaluation sheets designed to assist in selecting the right consultant for the job.

THE JOB OF LOCAL OFFICIALS

Those hiring professional consultants must thoroughly analyze their situation and isolate the problems they want solved. At this stage the local group is probably thinking of a general problem rather than dealing with specifics. As an example, they may see the need for a new municipal water system. There may be alternative sources of supply available, but the physical and economic feasibility of these have not been tested.

Stating the Problem

Local officials should first develop a clear statement of their problem as it exists, how it developed, and its ramifications, possible solutions, and methods of financing. The matter of financing is important. Many consultants, in addition to their professional specialty, are familiar with State and Federal agency programs. They can assist in processing applications for grants and loans as part of their services. If grants or loans are needed to expedite the program, the consultant should be familiar with the regulations, criteria, and specifications necessary for the community to receive this help.

A competent consultant will analyze data, gather new data, review the situation, work with the necessary local, State, and Federal agencies and complete the job he has been retained to do.

Before interviewing a consultant, the local group should appoint a spokesman as a contact for the organization. This way the consultant knows with whom he is dealing. It also avoids conflicting directions. The spokesman must be briefed on the consensus point of view. He must understand what is to be done, what the limitations are, and, above all, be able to convey this information to the consultant. He should be able to present the situation to the consultant, define the problem, and outline the services needed. However, he should not tell the professional consultant *how* to solve the problem or do any of the consultant's work. If other technical or professional services are needed for preliminary work, other consultants, members of the local group's professional staff, or similar professional help should be obtained.

The local group should draw up a brief statement of the nature of the problem and what is expected. This might be in the form of a letter that can be posted and published in local newspapers. This letter can be sent

to known consultants who may be interested in the job. This announcement should state the situation concisely, but should include enough detail for the professional to decide whether he is interested in working on the problem.

Gathering Background Information

The local development organization can assemble historical, physical, and demographic data for their own staff to use in planning and design. It will also be useful to the consultant.

Typical data often used by consultants in planning and engineering phases are:

- Climatic data including temperature, precipitation, frost season, and history of extremes.
- Operation records, including cost data on specific public facilities.
- Building permits issued.
- Population data on items such as age, sex, dispersion, and migration patterns.
- Local government structure.
- Tax data.
- Building and community improvements.
- School information.
- Any data or information available to the local group that could help solve the problem should be compiled and made available to the consultant.

Compiling such data not only expedites the consultant's job, saving the community time and money, but it also keeps the local group involved and informed.

Soliciting Consultants

How do you locate a consultant? The most usual way is through personal references or contact initiated by the consultant, since many consultants keep abreast of local planning and keep in touch by informal means. Often a formal community group will find several consultants contacting them before they are at the stage of the program where consultant services are needed.

Consultants can also be contacted through radio, TV, and newspapers; by placing ads in professional magazines; and by writing to known consultants.

After the project is announced, a pre-interview screening can determine which of the applicants are to be interviewed. The consultant's response should include the complete name of his firm, telephone number, the year the firm was established, biographical sketches of people expected to work on the project, and a brochure or sketch of experience on similar projects.

Interviewing is a costly process for both parties and should be limited. A letter should be sent to all applicants indicating whether or not they should appear for an interview.

Preparing for the Interview

The interview is normally conducted by representatives of local units of government, such as the mayor, councilmen, county commissioners, city engineer or planning commissioners.

The interviewers should prepare ahead of time. Tell the applicant the date, place, and time of the interview and the approximate time allowed for his presentation. He should already have been supplied with a statement of the problem, supporting data, and an organizational chart showing responsibilities within the group doing the interviewing.

Inform the consultant that the final selection will not be made until all applicants have been interviewed.

Have a room large enough to accomodate all persons expected to be present, and plan for needed visual aid equipment. (See Pre-interview Checklist, in Appendix.)

Materials such as the biographical sketch and brochures furnished by the interviewee should be studied before the interview to gain a working understanding of the consultant's firm and capabilities. This way the interviewers can gather more information during the interview and can clarify questions they may have.

THE INTERVIEW

The interview helps you evaluate the professional consultant's background and experience. This is a subjective process, but a few guidelines can help people unfamiliar with the technical aspects of consulting work to make an evaluation.

Remember that the consultant is a professional who has been licensed or recognized in his field. A consultant should be chosen, wherever possible, from a firm that has been licensed and recognized as doing the type of work and dealing with the kinds of problems that the local group is facing.

During the interview phase it can be expected that the professional consultant realizes what the problem is and has a general understanding of the specifics of working with your type of organization (municipal, county, State, private enterprise). He should have a concept of how he proposes to define, analyze, and solve the problem.

He should be able to outline the type of solution or service that he can perform. From past experience, the consultant should be able to tell whom he has to work with in the organization, the type of data that he needs, and the type and kind of personnel that will be contacted during the data gathering phase.

The consultant must be able to show that his firm, or a firm he has been associated with, has solved similar problems. He should have references from other organizations he has done similar work for, and other professional people he has worked with in local, State, and Federal agencies. The interviewers should be able to contact these references and get an evaluation of the firm's abilities and reputation.

The agenda for the interview could be as follows:

1. The interviewers recap to the interviewee what type of service they want and what they expect the consultant to do for them.

2. The consultant should supply professional references, a list of similar jobs completed, state whether or not his firm has the time and resources necessary to do the job, and give credit references. He should be prepared to discuss why he feels his firm is the best qualified.

After the preliminary interviews, rank the consultants in order of preference. The one the interviewers think best qualified is normally recalled for a second interview, during which any questions or details are clarified. The interviewers can then make their decision if they are satisfied that the first ranked consultant is best for their project.

The question of compensation is usually discussed in a general way during the first interview.

If for any reason the first ranked consultant is not retained, follow the same process with the next ranked consultants until one has been selected. Then notify all applicants.

Don't expect the interviewee (consultant) to answer specific technical questions about the problem except those items that will be general public knowledge, or are included in the material you supply. The consultant is paid to answer specific questions and make analyses. It would be an imposition to expect this information during the interview.

EVALUATING THE CONSULTANT

The local group is attempting to hire help in solving a local problem. Their purpose is to select the best assistance at the most reasonable cost. The interviewers now should evaluate: the consultant's presentation, professional standing and reputation, availability, personal interest, financial stability, experience and the total cost.

Although the evaluation process is highly subjective—there's no standard grading system—the rating form in the Appendix may help.

The interviewers normally take notes and use some type of coding or indexing system so that after the interview, they can recall the presentation in some detail.

The Consultant's Presentation

Weigh the consultant's presentation on his:

- Awareness of the local problem
- Clarity
- Preparedness
- Description of his proposed solution
- Emphasis in solving the problem
- Apparent knowledge in his professional specialty.

Interviewers should be satisfied that the consultant knows his field and can carry through the programs as outlined to him. He also must leave the feeling that he is a person with whom the group would like to be identified.

Professional Reputation

Several clues help evaluate the consultant's reputation. One of the best is to check with other clients he has worked with, as well as with references he has supplied. One adverse report may not be sufficient to reject a consultant, but the reasons for such a report should be thoroughly checked. If several adverse reports are received, for similar reasons, then the local group should be cautious.

References tend to be favorable. Weigh what is not said as well as what is said. When checking references, ask "Would you retain this consultant again for another similar job?" A telephone call, a letter, or personal contact will indicate the consultant's standing with his former clients.

Consider the consultant's standing and reputation with other professionals and business people. For instance: the architect's relationship with builders; the engineer's with construction contractors; or a lawyer's with a judge. These relationships are important. The best engineer in the country, who alienates the contractor, may end up causing high-cost projects because of delays and misunderstandings.

Another important consideration is the consultant's standing and image in his own profession. Membership in professional societies, and offices held, are indicative. Often being chairman or member of a technical committee indicates more proficiency than does holding the office of president.

Other keys to proficiency are the consultant's schooling, recent refresher courses, his library, and the professional magazines he reads. Published articles, university teaching experiences, or technical papers presented at professional meetings are further clues.

Availability

Often it is assumed that a consultant bidding for a project has the personal time or the personnel available to do the job within a stated time. This is not always true. During the interview he should present a realistic estimate of the time required and the number of people he will use to do the job. Many consultants strive for many contracts in the same general locality and try to work on more than one job at a time.

Operating this way, they tend to rely on secondary data and submit a general report that may be ineffective in solving the local problem. An estimate of time, personnel, and an outline of procedure should indicate a consultant's real inputs into the program.

Personal Interest

Give some weight to the consultant's base of operation and his personal interest in the community and local surrounding area. Often consulting firms are located in populous regions because their services are in greater demand there. This is not always a liability, particularly if the firm has worked in the local area. However, travel and time are expensive, and if a group of professionals must travel long distances, it adds to the cost of the project. Smaller local firms often have equally competent professional personnel, and being based near the project they have a greater personal interest in its success. Even though a local consultant may have a small staff, he can subcontract supporting activities such as clerical work, surveying, or drafting to local people or firms and thus keep much of the money in the area.

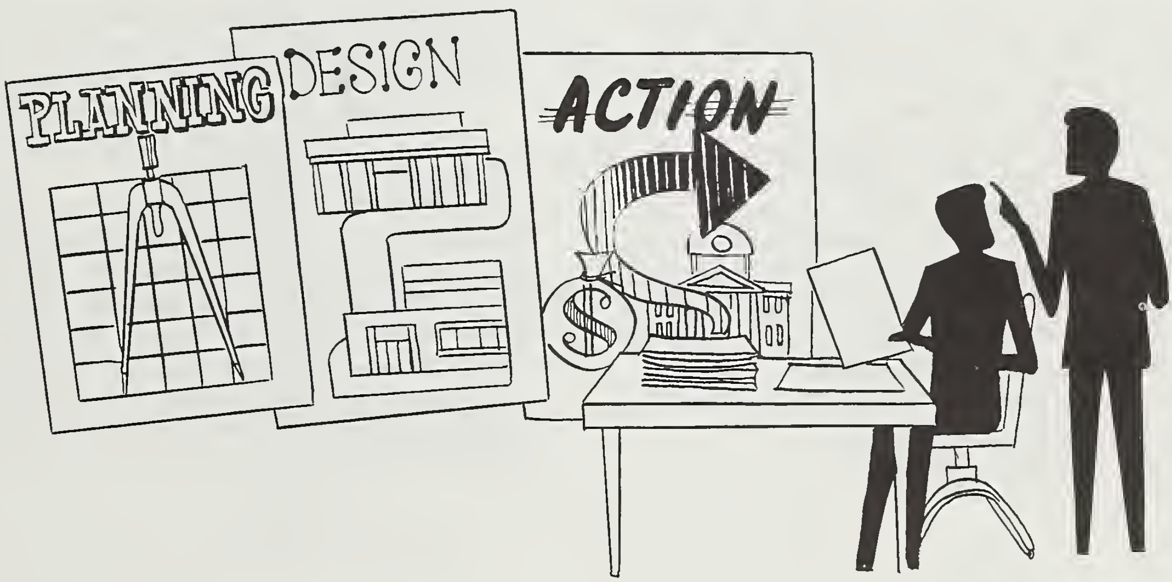
Financial Stability

Is the consultant financially stable? He should have enough financial resources to pay the overhead, wages, and cost of materials required to carry out the job. Financial stability should not be equated with size. Decide whether the consultant has the financial resources to pay his expenses during the time required to carry out the project. This can be ascertained through a local credit bureau or banking reference.

Experience

The consultant must have experience in the type of work required to solve the problems. This should be personal experience as well as the firm's experience. Remember that a young firm, or one just starting in business, does not have a large log of successfully completed projects. In these instances, consider and weigh where the consultant received his training and practical experience, and the type of work he has done.

Even though the consultant has had experience in a given field, new technology, knowledge, and methods are being developed so fast that the interviewers must decide whether the consultant's knowledge is up-to-date with new developments in his discipline. In a visit to the consultant's office, you might note the types of magazines he takes and membership certificates in technical societies he displays. Find out whether he has taken refresher courses.



HIRING THE CONSULTANT

After the interview comes the job of choosing the one to hire. List the interviewees ranked in order of preference, and call back the first choice for a second interview, if there are questions to be clarified.

Now is the time to get down to specifics on fees. If agreement can't be reached on this, you'll have to decide whether to negotiate further. If the interviewers have done their "homework," they'll know whether the fee is reasonable for the job.

You should understand what the fee should be for the job at hand. Consultants' professional societies usually have a guide for recommended fees. You should have looked at some of these before the first interview.

When the price is mutually agreed upon, your group becomes the consultant's client and a formal contract can be signed. The best procedure is to have the client's attorney of record draw up the contract for official acceptance by all parties. Many of the consulting engineer councils, national societies, and consultant's State societies offer sample contract forms as a free service.

HELPING YOUR CONSULTANT GET STARTED

During the planning, design, and action stage of the development project, the consultant must have available to him all kinds of information required to do his job. He must be kept fully informed of any new developments that could affect his job. Give him the opportunity to talk to, and gather information from, the people designated as the responsible individuals within your organization. Your personnel should understand that their cooperation with the consultant will greatly help the project.

Plan a schedule showing expected dates for completion of major steps.

The consultant will then:

- Gather data, information and facts.
- Assemble this material and make preliminary recommendations on the project (From these, the client can determine which course of action to take.)
- Make preliminary plans.

During these phases, the consultant should be able to make recommendations as to the impact of alternative solutions. He can estimate differences in cost between different methods, financing methods, etc. He can estimate the time needed to implement the plan.

After he has estimated costs and time, the consultant normally proceeds into the final implementation.

Appendix I

Pre-Interview Check List

INFORM THE INTERVIEWEE OF:

- Time
- Date
- Location
- Length of time allowed for his presentation.

SUPPLY THE INTERVIEWEE WITH:

- Data sheet of information
- Figures that bear upon problems
- Organizational chart of interviewing organization
- Statement of the problem.

SUPPLY INTERVIEWERS WITH:

- Rating forms
- Estimates of fees (from professional societies).

PHYSICAL EQUIPMENT:

- Room
- Slide projector and/or movie camera
- Other visual aid material required
- Chairs
- Paper and pencils for all
- Easel
- Blackboard
- Chalk and eraser.

Appendix II—Rating Form

Items to be Evaluated During the Interview

ITEM	WEIGHT 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
CONSULTANT'S INTEREST IN THE LOCAL PROBLEM.										
Does he have required material and information?										
Does he live in the local area?										
How much does he want the job?										
EVALUATION OF THE PRESENTATION.										
Knowledge of your requirements.										
Proposed solution seems reasonable.										
Clarity of presentation.										
Was emphasis on services to be rendered?										
Impressions as to interviewee's knowledge and capabilities.										
Apparent professional capability of handling the problem.										
FINANCIAL STABILITY.										
EXPERIENCE.										
Similar jobs completed.										
Does the firm have specialists in your type of work?										
Are the sub-contractors they normally retain capable in your type of work?										
Consultant should express a willingness to innovate to lower your project cost.										
Educational background and continuing education of consultant firm members.										
PROFESSIONAL STANDING AND REPUTATION.										
Reference responses.										
Reputation within the industry.										
Technical reputation.										

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